



BLOOD SWEAT & FEAR

With *Blade II*, the man who jokingly refers to himself as a "sewer connoisseur" takes the vampire myth into ghoulish new territory. **REGION 4** faces up to the reaper, director Guillermo Del Toro. **By Gaynor Flynn**

Cult horror director, Guillermo Del Toro first burst on to the cinematic screen a decade ago with his startling original debut feature *Cronos*. Winning the critics prize at the 1992 Cannes Film Festival, and subsequently taking home nine Mexican Academy Awards, del Toro, like the creatures he so graphically depicted, was someone to keep an eye on. With his latest two feature films, *Blade II* and *The Devil's Backbone*, Del Toro continues to flaunt convention and defy expectations.

The man who jokingly refers to himself as a "sewer connoisseur" is singlehandedly reviving the horror genre and taking it to a new level of sophistication. His love of horror began at an early age, and while he doesn't lay awake at night dreaming up new species of mutant bugs, he does admit to being continually fascinated by the "beastly side of man."

Raised in a strict Catholic household in a remote Mexican village, Del Toro remembers his childhood being "full of fears" which he drew upon for his "very personal ghost story" *The Devil's Backbone*. The film, he

says, "is autobiographical, but it's also filtered by the imagination." He had his first supernatural experience at the age of 12, "much like the kid in the movie" and says that "every emotional moment the characters live as children in that movie I have gone through in my childhood."

Del Toro, by his own admission, has witnessed "a lot of violence amongst and towards children with a lot of it very close to being fatal." He laughingly says that it's no wonder he's "spent 30 years trying to forget the first seven."

But rather than be put off by these experiences, the young Del Toro was hooked. "Horror for me is just more interesting and far more challenging than other genres. It allows me to create more freely. Horror is also probably one of the last refuges for man to have a hint of something supernatural. We've grown far too sophisticated to believe in organised religion anymore, and rarely do we feel touched by otherworldly forces. I think horror at its best manages to create some form of mythology that works at a basic emotional level. It's

probably the only genre that its name comes from the emotion it's supposed to create. I like that."

Comparing his latest two films, he says, is like "comparing a very small chamber piece of music to a Kiss album. One is a very slow moving atmospheric tale, influenced by the dark paintings of Goya, religious icons and gothic literature. *Blade II* is like a shiny toy that never stops moving. It's influenced by Japanese animation, comic books, and video games. I was going for totally a different rhythm of movie. I wanted to make a fun, martial arts horror film, like a ride. That's why I call *Blade II* the perfect popcorn movie. It's probably one of the movies I've enjoyed and had more fun shooting, I hope it shows."

It certainly does. Frenetically paced, feverishly gory, and possessing Del Toro's darkly comic sense of humour, he's managed to undertake the unenviable task of helming a

sequel while propelling it in an exciting new direction. The cinematic style and sensibilities between *Blade* and *Blade II* are so different that both films actually work on their own level. His nasty, animalistic blood suckers are visually brilliant. Del Toro has embraced the best of both genres without sacrificing plot, character or the integrity of *Blade*'s world. Not an easy task, which is exactly why Del Toro almost didn't take the job.

Initially reluctant to step into "someone else's universe", *Blade II* is the first film Del Toro hasn't originated himself. "It was liberating. It was good for the movie and good for me because if I'd been left to my own devices to create the screenplay... it wouldn't probably have been that fun and that fast moving and that accessible to an audience. It would have probably ended up being a little too skewed to be successful."

Not having to "think about the project in those terms" allowed

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him to just "concentrate on the pure visual joy." And while he admits to "tweaking" the screenplay and pushing it more towards a "true comic book realm", he says the basic structure remains the same. "I wanted to add more horror and more humour, and the violence to be more influenced by anime style, outlandish but believable. I'm a huge comic book fan, so I wanted it to be crazy. But I also wanted to add a few more humanistic touches like the father son relationship between Nomak and Damaskinos."

But what finally convinced him to take the job, was the opportunity to create "a new race of vampire". The concept of the Reapers, and the unlimited potential of these never-before-seen vampires was just too juicy to turn down. And while he loved Steve Norrington's bloodsuckers in *Blade*, because "they were really fun



and really scary", Del Toro wanted to make the film less urban and more fantastical.

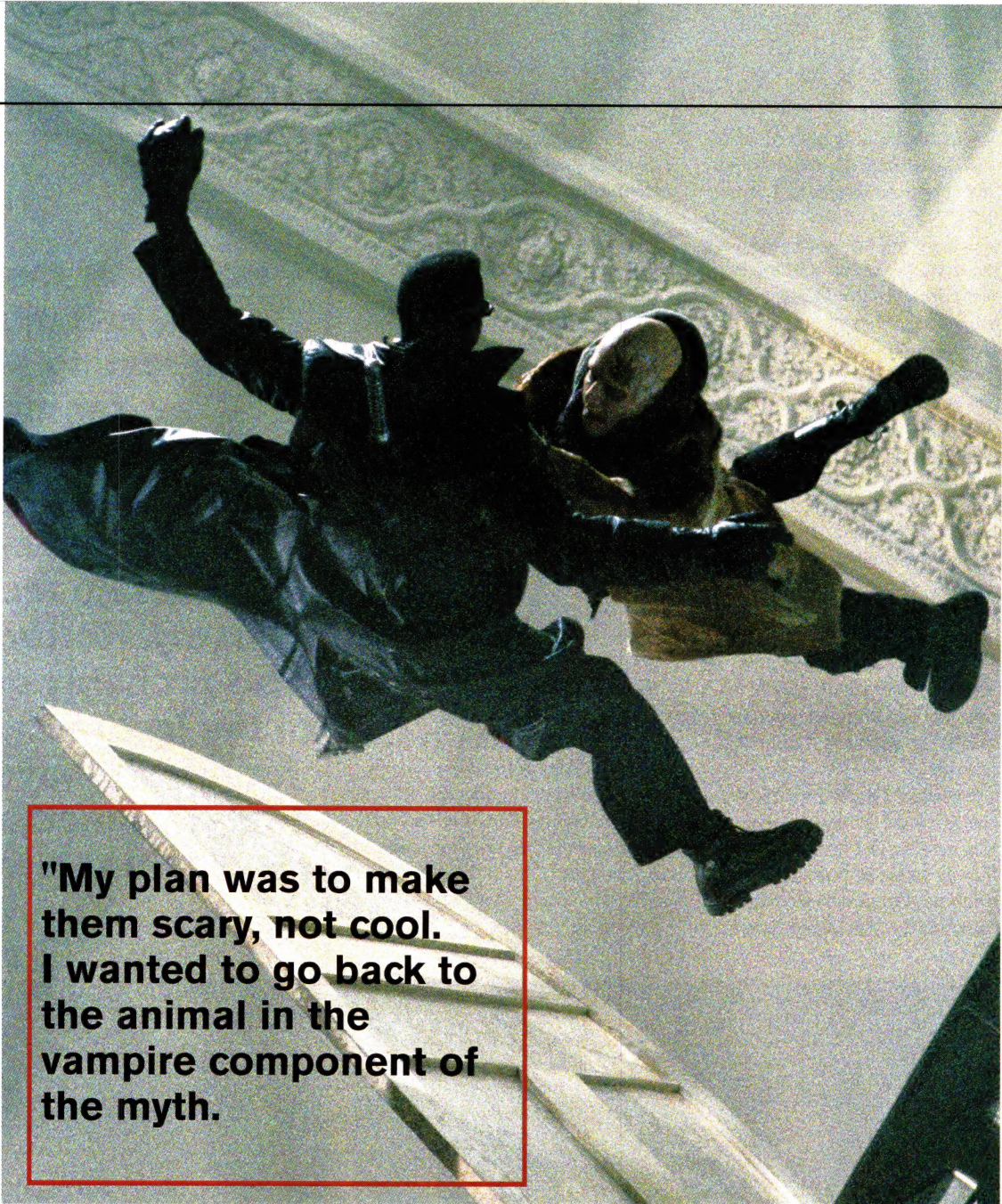
For research Del Toro "watched a lot of music videos" with a view to making "every fight scene different."

He wanted the action to be more fluid and balletic. He also studied music videos to understand what worked for younger audiences. As for horror, Del Toro has over 30 years of research behind him already. He admits to having watched "every Japanese horror film and every Hammer horror film" ever made. And while he tries to "stay faithful to horror," he also loves to "kick ass and make it unique."

With these conventions in mind, Del Toro wanted to move away from the hip vampires we've become accustomed to in shows like *Buffy* or *Angel* and take vampires to the next level - to rediscover a more original vampirism. "My plan was to make them scary, not cool. I wanted to go back to the animal in the vampire component of the myth. When you see a vampire you're talking about a species of bat that drinks blood, and essentially you're talking about a creature that feeds on the life force of another creature.

Lately when you say vampires you think about a sort of a Byronic dandy, or some kind of decadent romantic hero and I didn't want that... I wanted to explore, biologically, a new form of vampire that was closer to a leech than to Tom Cruise."

He can rest assured, no one is going to want these vampires to suck their neck. As for the future



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- well just like the Reapers in *Blade II*, the film offers are now coming thick and fast. Currently in production on *Hellboy* (due 2004), "a much bigger tale than *Blade II*", Del Toro says he's having "a lot of fun" and is not worried about the pressure of bigger budgets or being swallowed up by the Hollywood

machine. "I learnt a good lesson on *Mimic*, the more money the bloodier the battle. The only thing that changes with each film is the amount of stamina you need to last a long process. Luckily I seem to have enough energy to empower an entire village of working men. The other thing that changes is the

complexity technically of the things you're shooting and I'm pretty adept at that, so it's getting more and more fun for me to shoot movies. I hope it continues with *Hellboy*."

***Blade II* is released on DVD on Nov 20 and is reviewed on page 62.**

GUILLERMO DEL TORO - Filmography



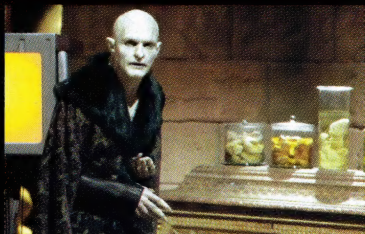
CRONOS (1992)
Del Toro's inventive debut feature not only refreshed the vampire legend but introduced his signature themes of strange insects, old men, religious iconography and funereal atmosphere.



MIMIC (1997)
Quick to poach new international talent, Hollywood enlisted Del Toro's talents for this stylish but formulaic big bug shocker. Mira Sorvino and Jeremy Northam battle mutant cockroaches below Manhattan.



THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE (2001)
The versatile Del Toro returned to his roots with this exquisitely realised and Deliberately understated ghost story, set in a boarding school during the final days of the Spanish Civil War.



BLADE II (2002)
For his next mainstream venture Del Toro returned to vampirism with a vengeance, resurrecting Wesley Snipes's slayer in a knockout sequel that surpasses the original.